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Regional Planning and Urban Revitalization in Mid-Sized Cities: A Case Study on Downtown Guelph

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Abstract

With over a decade having passed since the inception of the provincially led growth plan in Ontario, there is an opportunity to explore how cities have adapted to meet the challenges of this regional-scale plan. The *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* seeks to mitigate the negative effects of decades of sprawling development by focusing on building dense, urban, transit-connected communities. While the growth plan has a primary focus on municipalities in the Greater Toronto Area, it is also inclusive of smaller urban centres that sit outside of the province's Greenbelt. These mid-sized cities have a history of downtown decline and dispersed urban form. With the inclusion of mid-sized cities in the growth plan, however, there is an opportunity to explore the strategies smaller municipalities are using to attract public and private investment and achieve residential and employment provincial targets in their core areas by 2041. Through a case study approach, focused on downtown Guelph, Ontario, this paper argues that the growth plan can serve as a catalyst to alter the planning paradigm in mid-sized cities, and that through locally led community planning efforts, and a range of site-specific incentives, mid-sized cities can begin to revitalize their downtowns and reverse core area decline.

Keywords: Downtowns, mid-sized cities, growth plan, regional planning, Guelph

Résumé

Plus d'une décennie s'est écoulée depuis la création du plan de croissance dirigée par la province en Ontario, il est dès lors possible d'explorer la façon dont les villes se sont adaptées pour atteindre les objectifs d'intensification mandatés. Le « Plan de croissance pour le Grand Golden Horseshoe » vise à atténuer les effets négatifs de décennies de développement étendu en se concentrant sur la construction de communautés compacts, urbaines et relié par un réseau de transport. Bien que le plan de croissance se concentre principalement sur les municipalités de la région du Grand Toronto, il inclut également les petits centres urbains situés à l'extérieur de la ceinture de verdure de la province. Ces villes de taille moyenne ont une histoire de déclin du centre-ville et une forme urbaine étendue et dispersée. Cependant, avec l'inclusion de villes moyennes dans le plan de croissance, il est possible d'explorer les stratégies que les petites municipalités utilisent pour attirer les investissements publics et privés et atteindre les objectifs provinciaux résidentiels et d'emploi dans leurs domaines principaux par 2041. Notre étude de cas, basée sur le centre-ville de Guelph, Ontario, démontre que le plan de croissance peut servir de catalyseur pour modifier le paradigme de la planification dans les villes moyennes et que grâce à des efforts de planification communautaire et à une gamme de développement de sites spécifiques, celle-ci peuvent commencer à intensifier leur centre-ville et à inverser son déclin.

Mots clés: Centre-ville, villes moyennes, plan de croissance, aménagement régionale, Guelph

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Introduction

As the global population becomes increasingly urbanized, cities are grappling with sprawling suburbs, increasing highway congestion and the loss of environmentally sensitive land. While these challenges have been most acutely experienced in larger urban centres, smaller cities are also feeling the negative effects of dispersed, low-density development (Bunting, Filion, Hoernig, Seasons, & Lederer, 2007; Sands, 2007). Where downtowns used to be the primary civic and commercial node of small and mid-sized cities, a mid-twentieth century shift toward residential and commercial development on the periphery of these cities has resulted in depleted downtowns, a loss of viable farmland and automobile dependency in cities of this size (Burayidi, 2013; Filion, Hoernig, Bunting, & Sands, 2004; Sands, 2007).

In Ontario, a regional-scale growth plan is seeking to preserve natural heritage and agricultural land by reversing planning trends that have created low density, car-oriented development. The plan favours the creation of high-density, mixed-use, transit-connected communities. While the primary focus of the *Places to Grow Act* (Ontario, 2005) and the subsequent *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* (Growth Plan) (Ontario, 2006, 2017) is on large cities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the plan also includes eight stand-alone “outer ring” (2006, p. 52) mid-sized cities that sit outside of the primary GTA commuter-shed. Through the creation of “urban growth centres” the province has challenged mid-sized cities, with a history of low-density, dispersed development (Bunting et al. 2007; Filion et al. 2004; Sands 2007) to alter their suburban planning practices and direct public and private investments to their built-up areas, or downtowns.

With a decade having passed since its inception, there is an opportunity to explore whether the Growth Plan has altered traditional, suburban approaches to planning in mid-sized cities. Specifically, through a case study focused on the urban growth centre located in downtown Guelph, this paper will examine whether provincially directed growth planning can begin to reverse decades of downtown decline in mid-sized cities by asking: What impact can regional growth planning have on urban revitalization in mid-sized cities?

Mid-Sized City Downtowns

To better understand the emergence of growth planning in Ontario, it is important to first step back and explore the rise and fall of downtowns, especially those in smaller urban centres. In the early twentieth century, downtowns were of central importance to Canadian cities; downtowns were home to civic buildings and were the predominant area of commerce within a city. In the post-WWII period, however, the primacy of Canadian downtowns was challenged by the creation of residential and commercial districts outside of the downtown area (Filion & Hammond, 2008; Gad & Matthew, 2000; Grant, 2006; Hodge & Gordon, 2008; Sands & Reese, 2017; White, 2007). Suburban neighbourhoods appeared in the post-war period due to rapid economic growth, coupled with the need to build housing for a booming population with an increasing dependency on cars.

By the 1970s early signs of downtown decline began to emerge in both large and small Canadian cities. With automobile-friendly neighbourhoods popping up further from the city’s core, the arrival of regional shopping malls followed. In the next decades, large format retail centres, and employment lands easily accessed by highways, continued to expand while downtowns faced increased competition to fill vacant retail and office space (Filion & Hammond, 2008; Filion et al., 2004). By the 1970s, Canadian downtowns, especially those in smaller urban centres, were showing significant signs of decline. A sustained consumer preference for suburban living, coupled with a planning framework and a development industry that fueled greenfield building (Filion, 2007; Grant, 2006; Hodge & Gordon, 2008), would erode the commercial and residential viability of downtowns for decades.

As such, is not surprising that much of the literature on downtown revitalization speaks to a practitioner audience, offering operational steps toward repairing ailing downtowns in small and mid-sized cities. Robertson’s (2001) eight principles promoting downtown revitalization range from encouraging smaller cities to develop a vision and design guidelines, to establishing public/private partnerships, to capitalizing on downtown’s heritage assets to attract visitors. Burayidi’s (2015) research advocates for small and mid-sized cities to increase their downtown residential population by the creation of incentives to attract new development. This recommendation draws from Burayidi’s “en-RICHED” model (2013, p. 198), which involves thinking beyond traditional retail revitalization to focus on: residential development, immigration, cultural amenities, heritage and design. Underpinning both Robertson and Burayidi’s recommendations is the advice to not focus exclusively on a single-ticket item to ‘fix’ downtowns. This incremental approach to downtown revitalization is consistent with

other research on small and mid-sized cities that encourages researchers to embrace urban diversity (Bell & Jayne, 2009) in seeking to conceptualize broad urban agendas and depict generalizable models (for example relating to epochal urbanism, the structure and nature of the urban hierarchy, global cities and global city-regions and favours a focus on location-specific planning solutions (Filion, 2007). In addition to small scale, continuous improvements research on urban renewal in mid-sized cities also supports the important role of a downtown champion or advocate (Burayidi, 2013; Sands & Reese, 2017) who ensures that downtown issues remain on the municipal agenda.

While scholarship on small and mid-sized aims to capture the trends impacting cities of this size, scholars have called for additional research in order to better understand the urban experience outside of larger urban centres (Bell & Jayne, 2006, 2009; Bunting et al., 2007) in seeking to conceptualize broad urban agendas and depict generalizable models (for example relating to epochal urbanism, the structure and nature of the urban hierarchy, global cities and global city-regions. Bell and Jayne argue that smaller cities have been under conceptualized and relegated to the lowest level of the “urban hierarchy” (2009, p. 683) in seeking to conceptualize broad urban agendas and depict generalizable models (for example relating to epochal urbanism, the structure and nature of the urban hierarchy, global cities and global city-regions. Arguably, cities with smaller populations and a preference for suburban approaches to planning offer little fodder to urban researchers, however, in Ontario, a regional-scale growth plan (Ontario, 2006) that aims to halt decades of urban sprawl in favour of dense, mixed-use, transit oriented development is inclusive of eight mid-sized cities that sit outside of the primary commuter shed to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The focus of mandated smart growth in mid-sized cities provides an opportunity for researchers to explore how regional planning impacts local planning and economic development initiatives in these smaller urban centres.

Provincial Growth Planning

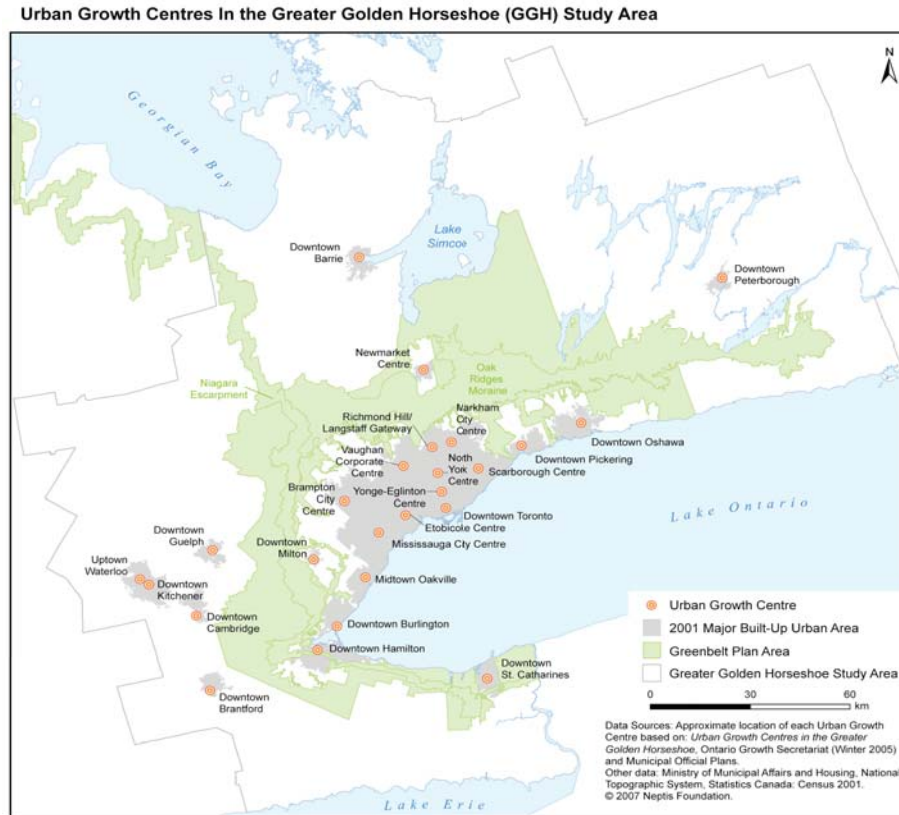
In Ontario, land use planning had been largely the purview of individual municipalities throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century (Eidelman, 2010; White, 2007). As the GTA continued to sprawl outwards, impacting both the environment and viable farmland, the province moved back into the regional planning arena (Eidelman, 2010) in order to direct growth to existing built up areas, promote transit use and protect Ontario’s natural heritage (Ontario, 2006). While each municipality has updated their planning framework to meet the targets of the provincial growth plan, this new approach to land use in Ontario has created an opportunity for researchers to explore the impact of regional scale planning on mid-sized cities.

Not only have mid-sized cities been specifically highlighted in the *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* (Growth Plan), but also one of the key pillars of the plan is focused on stimulating downtown revitalization. The Growth Plan calls for the creation of 25 urban growth centres (UGCs) (Figure 1), which are located in either existing historic downtowns or emerging suburban downtowns in cities across Ontario (2006, p. 12). These UGCs are further subdivided into those in the “inner ring” or “outer ring” (2006, pp. 49, 52); a term that illustrates a UGCs proximity to the province’s protected Greenbelt.

The UGCs are required to develop as high-density, mixed-use nodes that are designed to: attract public and private investment; employment and residential growth; and accommodate transit infrastructure (Filion, 2007; Ontario, 2006). Intensification in the UGCs is to be achieved via provincial targets that mandate the number of jobs and residents municipalities are to add by 2041. Predictably, the UGCs closest to the City of Toronto, or in the inner ring, such as Mississauga City Centre, have higher density targets to achieve compared to those in the outer ring such as Downtown Brantford (Table 1).

The eight UGCs in the outer ring, extending from Downtown Peterborough to Downtown St. Catharines, share several characteristics that present specific challenges and opportunities when implementing the Growth Plan. As mid-sized cities, with populations ranging from 80,000-200,000 they have: historic downtown core areas; downtown Business Improvement Areas (BIAs); and at least one post-secondary institution. These cities have also experienced a decline in their manufacturing base; core area decline; and dispersed suburban development (Bunting et al., 2007; Filion, 2007).

Figure 1: Urban Growth Centres Map



(Neptis Foundation 2015)

Table 1: Growth Targets for the Urban Growth Centres

400 people and jobs/hectare	200 people and jobs/hectare	150 people and jobs/hectare
Downtown Toronto	Downtown Brampton	Downtown Barrie*
North York Centre	Downtown Burlington	Downtown Brantford*
Scarborough Centre	Downtown Hamilton	Downtown Cambridge*
Yonge-Eglinton Centre	Downtown Kitchener*	Downtown Guelph*
	Uptown Waterloo*	Downtown Peterborough
	Downtown Milton	Downtown St. Catharines*
	Markham Centre	
	Mississauga City Centre	
	Midtown Oakville	
	Downtown Oshawa	
	Downtown Pickering	
	Richmond Hill/Langstaff	
	Vaughan Corporate Centre	

* denotes and outer ring UGC

(Ontario, 2006, 2017)

Regional Planning and Local Economic Development

Applying a regional lens to the planning process creates the ability to address broad, systemic challenges and opportunities across a geographic area (P. Hall & Tewdwr-Jones, 2011; Hodge & Gordon, 2008; Hodge, Hall, & Robinson, 2017). This can include creating policies around infrastructure investments, environmental protection (De Sousa, 2017) and growth management (Hodge et al., 2017). In Ontario, the regional-scale Growth Plan aspires to the principles of smart growth (Edwards & Haines, 2007; Goetz, 2013) with a goal of mitigating sprawl, creating walkable neighbourhoods and connecting communities through transit. These principles exist in contrast to the low-density, dispersed planning approach (Bunting et al., 2007) that has become so prevalent in mid-sized cities. Now, with the provincial mandate to add jobs and residents to their downtown core areas, Ontario's mid-sized cities in the Growth Plan area have updated their planning frameworks, as well as their approach to local economic development, in order to meet this objective.

Arguably, transitioning a mid-sized city with prolific suburbanization and a stagnant downtown requires more than a change to land use regulations. While the Growth Plan's regional scope was designed to reimagine development of the Greater Golden Horseshoe, it did not offer financial support to municipalities to achieve these smart growth objectives (Allen & Campsie, 2013). As such, in addition to updating their planning frameworks, many municipalities also chose to realign their local economic development programs with Growth Plan goals. The creation and use of financial incentives to attract investment in cities has been widely debated in the literature.

In the twentieth century, with an economy focused on manufacturing, incentives were used to attract new businesses to cities; this "smokestack chasing" approach to economic development was targeted toward wealth generation for cities (Bradshaw & Blakely, 1999). As the economy shifted away from manufacturing toward a new, knowledge-based economy, emerging thinking about local economic development advances the idea that incentives must be carefully used by cities and should focus on enhancing the quality of life for all residents, not just on wealth creation (Leigh & Blakely, 2017). Reese's (2014) research explores the effectiveness of incentives used by municipalities to foster local economic development. Her research finds that the use of incentives, such as tax increment financing (TIF) or tax abatement, has little impact on the economic health of citizens, especially in smaller cities. However, Reese also finds that municipal investments in programs that support local job creation and entrepreneurship, or those designed to improve a community's overall quality of life, can develop a city's potential in the new economy.

In their research on "the successful few" small metropolitan downtowns, Filion et al. find that "constant vigilance" (2004, p. 339) is required to sustain municipal interest in small city core areas. They argue that due to the prevalence of greenfield, or suburban development, the use of incentives an important tool for municipalities to use to draw private investment to downtowns (Filion et al., 2004). De Sousa's (2017) research finds that the presence of incentives to build on brownfield, or contaminated, sites in the core areas of Waterloo and Kingston, Ontario are helping to unlock urban sites and encourage developers to build more sustainably. The recognition that downtowns in smaller urban centres require resources to combat "pro-suburban" (Filion et al., 2004, p. 339) forces is shared in the small and mid-sized city literature (Burayidi, 2013, 2015; Filion, Bunting, Frenette, Curry, & Mattice, 2000; Robertson, 1999; Seasons, 2003). While there is support for the use of targeted incentives amongst scholars, researchers also caution that there is a need for additional resources to monitor and evaluate plans and programs impacting mid-sized cities (Momani & Khirfan, 2013; L. A. Reese, 2014; Seasons, 2003). This review of the literature illustrates that while there is some scholarship on the urban experience in smaller urban centres, there remain significant gaps in the literature. Through the inclusion of mid-sized cities in the regional-scale provincial Growth Plan, and the new focus on smart growth in smaller urban centres, this research will explore the role of regional planning on downtown revitalization in mid-sized cities.

Research Methods

To explore the role of regional planning on downtown revitalization in mid-sized cities, a case study city was selected, and a range of qualitative research methods was used to collect data. The City of Guelph was selected because it represents a stand-alone, single-tiered municipality with a historic downtown that has experienced significant levels of core area decline due to suburban development. Guelph sits outside of both the provincially protected Greenbelt area and the primary commuter-shed to the Greater Toronto Area. The city is home to over 130,000 residents and in 2006 its downtown was designated a provincial urban growth centre (UGC) in the

Growth Plan. This UGC status means that Guelph will need to achieve a minimum of density of 150 residents and jobs in its core area by 2041 (Ontario, 2006, 2017).

While Guelph has experienced core area decline it also has several assets that include: the presence of well-established residential neighbourhoods abutting its downtown; two post-secondary institutions, the University of Guelph and Conestoga College; an active agri-food business sector; and a low unemployment rate of 3.9% compared to the national average of 6.6% reported by Statistics Canada in 2017. Downtown Guelph has also had a Business Improvement Area (BIA) that has been active since the 1970s. The BIA represents the interests of the largely small and medium sized independently owned businesses located in the core. While there are over 400 business and property owner members of the BIA, there is limited housing downtown; according to a 2017 report on Growth Planning presented to Guelph City Council, its downtown density has sat at between 90-96 people and jobs per hectare for the last several years.

While scholars have been critical of the largely case study approach in the small and mid-sized city literature, (Faulk, 2006), selecting a single mid-sized city for a case study on downtown revitalization allowed for what Neuman describes as a detailed examination of the case's "internal features" (2014, p. 42). It should be noted that for the purpose of this study, a mid-sized city is defined as a city with a population of 50,000-500,000 (Bunting et al., 2007; H. Hall & Hall, 2008; Seasons, 2003). Data collection for this research took place throughout 2015 and 2017 and included: a literature and document review, site visits and key informant interviews. A key limitation of this study is its focus on a single city; however, this research can be replicated in other mid-sized cities with an urban growth centre in both the inner ring and outer ring of the Greater Golden Horseshoe. Moreover, it can be replicated in other parts of the country, in both growth and non-growth areas, where regional plans aim to direct land use planning in smaller urban centres.

To understand Guelph's response to the Growth Plan, a review of municipal documents was undertaken. This included a review of the content of presentations offered to city council by staff as the city's planning documents were being updated, as well as a review of the content of Guelph's Official Plan update, the Downtown Secondary Plan (DSP) and two new Community Improvement Plans (CIPs). Where the DSP offered a broad vision for downtown renewal, highlighting key sites that could absorb increased density, the CIPs offered incentives to private developers to undertake key projects on sites such as underutilized brownfields as well as gateway locations to the downtown. To explore the community's response to the Growth Plan, a review of local on-line newspapers including the Guelph Tribune and the Guelph Mercury Tribune was also undertaken using search terms: downtown, population and growth plan. A review of content showed articles, letters to the editor and editorials detailing the community's response to Guelph's plan to grow its population to 191,000 by 2041. This review of the grey literature offered a lens into the community's concerns with respect to growth, these included: impact on the water shed, increased traffic and congestion, and the presence of tall buildings impacting pre-existing residential neighbourhoods. On a positive note, it also highlighted community support and interest in public realm improvements and investments in regional transit.

To complete the data collection, interviews were held with a range of urban actors including: downtown planners (2); citizens and business representatives on the Downtown Advisory Committee (3); the co-founder of the downtown coworking space (1); private sector land developers (3); and the Executive Director of the downtown Business Improvement Area (1). Interviewees were selected through purposeful sampling for their in-depth knowledge on one or more of the following issues: the growth plan, urban planning, downtown economic development, urban revitalization, and private sector investment downtowns. During the period of 2015-2017 a total of 10 key-informant, semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or over the telephone, detailed notes were taken or the conversation recorded, transcribed and then coded for themes. Conversations lasted between thirty minutes to two hours, but the majority of interviews were one hour in length. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth conversations with each urban actor, and while set questions were prepared in advance, this style of interviewing allowed for new information to come forward in each interview.

Findings

The City of Guelph is a single-tiered municipality with over 130,000 residents located an hour west of Toronto in the outer ring of the Greater Golden Horseshoe. With a historic downtown core, a top-ranked comprehensive university and an industrial base rooted in agri-business and advanced manufacturing—Guelph has a low unemployment rate and a high quality of life for residents. Despite these positive attributes, Guelph has

followed other mid-sized city planning trends, growing in a largely low density, dispersed fashion (Bunting et al., 2007). According to the downtown Guelph Business Improvement Area (BIA), the proliferation of suburban development and the prioritization of large format commercial and retail nodes outside of the city's core has affected the health of the downtown (Business Improvement Area Executive Director, personal communication, December 4, 2015). Despite new public investments in a downtown mall, performing arts centre and sports arena throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, these large projects were single or one off investments, and were not part of a broader plan focused on overall downtown renewal. As such, they did little to generate subsequent private investment (City of Guelph, personal communication, February 11, 2015).

In 2006, when the Growth Plan was announced, there was mixed reaction in the local media to growing Guelph to 175,000 residents and 92,000 jobs in the coming decades. Despite initial skepticism and concerns over the impact of growth on the local groundwater system, after extensive consultations throughout 2009-2011, the city aligned its planning framework with provincial targets, updating its Official Plan, drafting multiple versions of a Downtown Secondary Plan (City of Guelph, 2016), and creating financial incentives through a Downtown Community Improvement Plan (City of Guelph, 2012) to attract private sector investment to the city's urban growth centre in its historic core. The City of Guelph shared that the consultation process was inclusive of: design charrettes; public meetings; open houses; and regular consultations with residents, business and other stakeholder groups (City of Guelph, personal communication, February 11, 2015).

The Downtown Secondary Plan (DSP) was first created in 2012, and then consolidated in 2016 after challenges at the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB). The DSP, as a part of the city's Official Plan, replaced the land use policies that previously existed for the city's Central Business District (CBD). As the city updated its planning framework to respond to the presence of an urban growth centre (UGC) in its downtown, the DSP outlined key principles and outcomes, ranging from a focus on attracting small and medium sized businesses downtown to reconnecting people to the river system, to reach its goal. The plans call for the creation of a downtown that is a "thriving high-density urban centre and a popular destination still minutes from the countryside" (2016, p. 5).

The outcomes in the DSP were consistent with provincial goals in the Growth Plan (Ontario, 2006), and illustrated how the Downtown Guelph UGC could achieve a minimum density of 150 people and jobs per hectare by 2031. However, to operationalize this vision, downtown planners in the city described the need for private sector partners willing to invest in the core (City of Guelph, personal communication, February 11, 2015). After extensive consultations with downtown citizens, local and regional developers, local business associations and surrounding municipalities, the City of Guelph launched the Downtown Guelph Community Improvement Plan (City of Guelph, 2011, 2012), or CIP, and a Brownfield Remediation Community Improvement Plan (City of & Guelph, 2012).

Based on the uptake on both CIP programs, it was not surprising to learn that private developers cite the creation of these programs as "the reason we chose to develop downtown" (Land developer, personal communication, March 13, 2015). The Executive Director of the BIA shared that "Talking with the community first, local businesses, citizens and developers allowed us [municipal staff] to create incentives that reflected the needs of our community" (Personal communication, December 4, 2015). A regional land developer described how "Consultations for the Downtown Secondary Plan were a great start, because downtown has a lot of constraints with heritage buildings, and there are not a lot of sites to develop on" (Personal communication, March 13, 2015).

Fusion Homes is currently building 133 residential units in the core and the site it is building on has benefited from grants from the Brownfield Remediation Community Improvement Plan as well as the Major Activation Grant program in the Downtown Guelph Community Improvement Plan. The Fusion Homes development, also known as *Metalworks*, achieves several core principles embedded in the Secondary Plan, offering a variety of housing types, including high rise condominium and town houses; reconnecting residents to the river through the reactivation of a river walk; and is restoring a heritage property on site to become a distillery and restaurant. Publicly celebrated ground breaking ceremonies, overnight camping at the sales centre, and sold out condominium developments illustrate this project's success.

Table 2: Selected Quotes from Interviews

Theme	Selected Quotes
The Growth Plan was a catalyst for change to the municipal planning framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BIA: “Ten years ago this level of [residential] development would have been unthinkable in downtown Guelph.” • Downtown Advisory Committee: “There have not been this many cranes downtown for many years.” • City Planner: “The creation of a Downtown Manager position helped the city understand our [private sector’s] perspective.” • BIA: “It [the Downtown Secondary Plan] had a major role, without P2G this would not have happened.” • City Planner: “Proactively allowing for 18 stories on selected sites was a huge step forward for intensifying [residential development in] downtown Guelph.” • BIA: “[The Growth Plan] set the stage for growth in downtown Guelph.”
Community engagement is essential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private Developer: “The early [2009] consultations and drafts of the secondary plan with changes to land use and building heights was really important, it allowed us [local developers] to create economies of scale.” • Private Developer: The Secondary Plan set the stage for growth in downtown Guelph.” • City Planner: “Talking with the community first, local businesses, citizens and developers allowed us [municipal staff] to create incentives that reflected the needs of our community.” • Private Developer: “Consultations for the Downtown Secondary Plan were a great start, because downtown has a lot of constraints with heritage buildings, and there are not a lot of sites to develop on.” • BIA: “Talking with the community about their downtown first allowed for broader buy-in to the changes that were about to happen, it wasn’t perfect, but it went a long way to building bridges.”
Targeted financial incentives can help municipalities reach their intensification goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Planner: “In the first year, all 1.5 million allocated to incentives for downtown Guelph were spoken for, we [the municipality] could have not predicted this quick uptake, but it shows the pent up market demand for downtown housing.” • Coworking Founder: “The funding we received [municipal incentive] enabled us to attract other investors, it was a foundational piece in the early days.” • Private Developer: “Brownfield incentives allowed our project to happen.” • Private Developer: “Getting the tax increment grants was really important to making our project work.” • Private Developer: “These incentives [in the Community Improvement Plan] sent a clear message to the development industry that the city was ready to intensify downtown.” • Private Developer: “The funding we received enabled us to attract other investors, it was a foundational piece in the early days that helped launch our vision.”

The *Metalworks* project, has not, however, been without its detractors. According to the Downtown Advisory Committee (DAC), the initial neighbourhood response to the development was highly contentious. Through extensive community consultations, negotiations and height and density amendments, the developer and neighbourhood residents found a workable solution, and the project has moved ahead with the support of both the city and local residents. While the owner of Fusion Homes is quick to point out “high-rise [condominiums] equals high risk [to the developer]” as local developers, they are “extremely proud to be taking on this signature

project in downtown Guelph” (Land Developer, personal communication, March 13, 2015). A member of the Downtown Advisory Committee, who is a long term resident and business owner downtown shared that “there have not been this many cranes downtown for many years” (DAC Board Member, personal communication, January 5, 2017).

While the *Metalworks* development illustrates how a development can meet multiple objectives of both the Growth Plan (Ontario, 2006, 2017) and the DSP (City of Guelph, 2016), this project has not occurred in isolation. In addition to the 133 units being added in Phase One of the *Metalworks* development, London Ontario based, Tricar Group has also built and fully sold-out two 18-storey mixed use condominium towers downtown, housing 270 residential units. These developments were supported by two financial incentives in the Community Improvement Plan—tax increment and brownfield remediation grants. An executive at Tricar describes how the Downtown Secondary Plan “set the stage for growth in downtown Guelph” by removing the six storey height limits and identifying key sites that could absorb up to 18 storey buildings (Tricar executive, personal communication, May 19, 2017). He also spoke to the challenges of developing downtown sites that can be contaminated or have outdated underground infrastructure. Through city incentives, Tricar was able to clean up and build two 18-storey condominiums on previously dormant sites in downtown Guelph—Tricar indicated “brownfield incentives allowed our project to happen” (Personal communication, May 19, 2017).

According to Tricar, hundreds of residential units are being purchased by a demographic that is not currently represented in the downtown core, “You’ve got the empty-nesters, the baby boomer types who are downsizing” and “young professionals are also buying in...[t]hey really like the vibrancy and the culture the downtown provides” (O’Flanagan, 2013). Fusion Homes indicated that their site also appeals to a similar demographic, and that two-way all-day regional rail and the investments in Guelph Central Station “helped make their project a reality” (Land developer, personal communication, March 13, 2015).

In addition to these residential projects, the Community Improvement Plan has funded several minor Downtown Activation Grants that have been received by two commercial developers in the downtown core: Tyrcathlen Partners, owners of the historic Petrie Building; and 10 Carden Shared Spaces, owners of the local coworking space—a location that offers shared workspace to a diverse membership. Both developments are focused on revitalizing previously underutilized buildings to create new commercial and office space in downtown Guelph—spaces that will help the city achieve its employment density targets in the Growth Plan and achieve a DSP principle of attracting small and medium size enterprises downtown. A co-founder of *10 Carden Shared Spaces* describes the impact of the grant, “The funding we received enabled us to attract other investors. It was a foundational piece in the early days that helped launch our vision to expand our coworking space in downtown Guelph” (Personal communication, May 12, 2017). As a coworking space, *10 Carden Shared Spaces* provides affordable, amenity-rich shared workspace to local entrepreneurs (Merkel, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012), small businesses and social enterprise organizations. Its co-founder describes how the space is “future proofing downtown against impending gentrification,” preserving affordable space for new enterprises in a downtown that is slowly intensifying (Personal communication, May 12, 2017).

The renewed focus on downtown planning in Guelph not only created changes in the planning framework, adding financial resources to CIPs, but also served to add dedicated municipal resources to the core. In addition to a Downtown Renewal Corporate Manager, there is also a dedicated Downtown Planner focused on implementing the vision of the Downtown Secondary Plan. As one local land developer shared, “The creation of a Downtown Manager position helped the city understand our [private sector’s] perspective” (Personal communication, May 19, 2017). To support a team of staff, a committee of Council called the Downtown Advisory Committee (DAC) was also created. DAC is comprised of local residents, businesses and property owners with an interest in downtown development and renewal. Established in 2011, the role of DAC is to “provide strategic input and advice to Council and Staff on matters pertaining to issues impacting the economic, social, cultural, environmental, physical and educational conditions in Downtown Guelph” (City of Guelph, 2017). As these developments begin to emerge in downtown Guelph, stakeholders are hopeful that the hundreds of new residents downtown will support local businesses and ensure a vibrant downtown in the decades ahead.

Analysis

Despite decades of core area decline and limited private sector investment in downtown Guelph, the first theme that emerged from the research speaks to the catalytic role that a provincially led, regional scale plan, the

Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (Ontario, 2006, 2017), can play in changing municipal planning and charting a path towards downtown revitalization. The literature illustrates how a regional planning lens can offer a broader perspective on land use, environmental protection and infrastructure needs (Hodge et al., 2017) than can be achieved by planning within the boundaries of individual municipalities (Hodge & Gordon, 2008). In this case, the regional growth plan mandated the use of smart growth principles, including dense, mixed-use, transit connected urban form, in the downtowns of Ontario's mid-sized cities within the Greater Golden Horseshoe area. While significant public investments, in the form of a downtown shopping mall, arena and performing arts centre, had occurred in Guelph throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, these investments were not a part of a broader plan focused on downtown revitalization. As such, in isolation, they did little to attract reciprocal private investments. This finding has resonance with the small and mid-sized city literature which actively discourages the use of single, 'one off' projects to repair ailing core areas (Filion & Hammond, 2008; Filion et al., 2004; Robertson, 2001; Walker, 2009)

However, since the advent of the Growth Plan, which triggered a realignment of the municipal planning framework, private developers attribute the creation of a publicly endorsed downtown land use plan as creating a "predictable" investment environment for the core. According to a 2018 staff report to City Council, the Downtown Secondary Plan and an initial \$32 million municipal investment in a Tax Increment Based Grant Reserve leveraged: \$316 million in new construction projects; generated \$3.4 million annually in new tax revenue; and resulted in 827 new residential units have been built by private developers in the core. The presence of residents in the core areas of smaller urban centres is a key revitalization strategy outlined in the literature (Burayidi, 2013; Robertson, 2001), and while it is too soon to establish a causal link between the residents in the core and downtown revitalization, the increase in downtown residential density has added vitality to city streets.

The second theme illustrates the importance of community engagement in the local planning process. Through extensive public consultation, or collaborative planning (Healey, 2003), the creation of a Downtown Secondary Plan and Community Improvement Plans provided a road map for the public and private sector investors, and allowed for a shared understanding as to how and where the municipality would direct growth downtown. This process afforded the opportunity to engage local stakeholders including residents, business owners, community groups and developers in the downtown planning process, creating a space to share ideas and brainstorm the future of downtown Guelph. The plans were vetted through multiple audiences, and despite initial concerns, are being implemented. Land developers attribute the success of the plan to pro-active community engagement and the creation of a predictable, pre-zoned environment for future development sites.

The final theme that emerged from the findings illustrates the impact of creating targeted, location-specific financial incentives to achieve municipal planning goals (Burayidi, 2013, 2015; Filion et al., 2004), but also highlights the importance of their ongoing monitoring and evaluation (Momani & Khirfan, 2013; L. A. Reese, 2014). Findings show that the creation of incentives offered through the Community Improvement Plans served to defray initial start up costs, helping developers and property owners initiate key projects that were consistent with the downtown planning goals. With a primary goal of expanding the downtown tax base, the immediate uptake on Community Improvement Plan incentives allowed the municipality to scale back incentives each year as the downtown market became increasingly attractive to developers and consumers alike. Moving forward, it will be important for the City of Guelph to evaluate the overall health of the downtown, and while initial investments in brownfield remediation and residential development are important steps toward downtown revitalization, the other key metric of the Growth Plan involves creating new jobs in the city's core. As such, Guelph could consider providing incentives that foster local entrepreneurship and employment programs that serve to improve the overall quality of life and economic health for local residents (L. A. Reese, 2014)

The three themes that emerged from the research findings illustrate how the confluence of a regional-scale growth plan, coupled with strong community engagement and locally curated financial incentives have altered the planning paradigm, and can begin to chart a path toward revitalization of downtown Guelph. However, this research has also identified an important cautionary note. As mid-sized downtowns begin to experiment with planning for growth, and seek to reverse decades of core area decline, the impending impact of gentrification of mid-sized city downtowns, especially those in growth areas, cannot be ignored. In downtown Guelph, the condominium market is appealing to young professionals and retirees, but with prices ranging from \$300,000-1,000,000, there has been little local discussion of the importance of creating affordable or family housing units in these developments. Moreover, as real estate prices continue to rise in the Greater Toronto Area, cities like

Guelph will continue to see rising real estate prices. As such, in Ontario, it is essential for cities to consider how they will work with federal and provincial partners to carve out space for affordable housing downtown.

Conclusion

Bell and Jayne challenged researchers to “think big about thinking small” (2009, p. 684) and to developing scholarship focused on smaller urban centres. Indeed, one of the key themes that emerges in the small and mid-sized city literature is a criticism of urban studies for not exploring the urban experience outside of big cities (Bell & Jayne, 2006; Burayidi, 2013; Robertson, 2001; Simard, 2005). In Ontario, the creation of a regional-scale plan focused on sustainable growth and development of both large and mid-sized cities has provided an opportunity to generate research on how provincially mandated planning impacts planning outcomes and downtown revitalization in the province’s mid-sized cities.

Through a case study based approach focused on the urban growth centre located in downtown Guelph, this research has illustrated how the Growth Plan has become a catalyst for change in this mid-sized city. While far from being the sole solution to reverse decades of core area decline in Guelph, the advent of the Growth Plan has altered the planning paradigm, allowing the city to: envision sites that could absorb downtown intensification; put financial incentives in place to attract private investment; and allocate staffing resources to assist with downtown project design and implementation.

The creation of a Downtown Secondary Plan and Community Improvement Plans were identified by developers and local property owners as important signals regarding the city’s willingness to focus and invest in downtown renewal. Indeed, developers in Guelph claim that in the absence of these incentives, which included brownfield remediation and tax increment grants, they would not have made substantial investments in the core (De Sousa, 2017). Through the use of initial public investments to leverage private developments, in the form of targeted financial incentives, Guelph has joined other municipalities in using this planning tool to attract new development and expand the city’s tax base (Burayidi, 2015; Canadian Urban Institute & International Downtown Association, 2013).

Since the advent of the Growth Plan (Ontario 2006; Ontario 2017), urban development in downtown Guelph is taking place in a manner that is consistent with recommendations stemming from the small and mid-sized city literature. Not only are these changes incremental (Gratz, 1989; Robertson, 2001), but they are part of a broad-based, long-term strategy focused on downtown renewal (Walker, 2009) and are inclusive of important new constituents in the downtown environments—namely downtown residents (Burayidi, 2013). Throughout the planning process, the municipality has engaged a range of urban actors including: local residents, non-profit groups, business associations, university students, and private land developers. Guelph’s experience illustrates how collaborative approaches to planning (Healey, 1997, 2003) can lead to positive outcomes for cities. Amidst growth and change in downtown Guelph, research findings also consider how these developments can lead to downtown gentrification, making it difficult to find affordable housing and commercial space in the core area.

This research, while focused on a single city case study in downtown Guelph, begins to explore the role that mid-sized cities can play in urban affairs. Through the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the Province of Ontario has applied current urban planning trends which favour dense, walkable, transit-connected cities, onto mid-sized cities. With a history of low density, dispersed development and associated downtown decline, the Growth Plan has been a catalyst to help launch urban planning in mid-sized cities into the twenty-first century. While the Growth Plan is not a panacea, it has the ability to begin to positively alter the trajectory of urban planning and downtown revitalization in mid-sized cities.

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